

“This Fellow Welcomes Sinners”

Scripture: Luke 15:1-2
Rev. Chuck Williamson



September 21, 2025

Our scripture today comes from the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luke 15 is one of my favorite chapters in the whole Bible. It's there that you will find three of the most well-known and most-beloved parables of Jesus: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son—the Prodigal Son.

Here's the set up; here's what led Jesus to tell these parables. Lots of people were coming to hear Jesus teach, to see how he was relating to other people. Lots of people were coming, but they weren't all the “right” kind of people. Among them were tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners. The Pharisees, seeing all these people flock to Jesus, couldn't believe that Jesus would let such unsavory people be there. They even saw Jesus breaking bread with them—sinners.

Here's how Luke 15 begins. Luke 15:1-2. I'm reading from *The Message*.

So let's pray, and after the choir leads us in worship, we'll dive into these parables.

Lord Jesus, we too are drawn to you because we want to experience your love and hear your promises. So through the words of scripture speak to us today. Amen.

In the past I have said that my least favorite part of the worship service is the Prayer of Confession. I don't like it because I don't like confessing my sins. I don't like being reminded of the ways I have messed up, the ways I have failed, how I have broken promises, how I have been selfish, how I have sinned. I don't like it. But we can't escape it. Sin in us all.

As Will Willimon has written, “sin is not simply some act that we commit now and then, not some momentary lapse in the human spirit: sin is inherent in the human spirit.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said that the difference between a Christian and a heathen is that a Christian knows that he...that she...is a sinner.

I'm not sure when I learned that I am a sinner—maybe I've known it all along.

When I was just a little kid—4 or 5 years old—one day I sneaked into the bathroom, climbed up on the sink, reached in the medicine cabinet and got a bottle of cough syrup with codeine in it. I went downstairs, hid behind some clothes in the closet, closed the door and drank the whole bottle. When my mother found me, I had the empty bottle in my back pocket like a wino.

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Even as a little kid, I must have known that there are some things you try to hide, try to keep in the dark.

Just to finish the cough syrup story—I did learn that there are consequences to our actions because my parents had to rush me to the hospital where they pumped my stomach, and then my parents to stay up all night walking me around, making sure I didn’t fall asleep.

As a four-year-old, I would not have been able to verbalize that I am a sinner, but I must have known.

Like they say at Alcoholics Anonymous: my name is Chuck, and I am a sinner.

That is why I love these parables that Jesus told. We’ve got three parables—all with a common theme: lost and found, and the joy that comes in the finding. You’ve got 100 sheep and one of them turns up missing. So you search and search until you find the lost sheep and there is great joy. Or you have ten coins and you realize one of them is missing. So you turn the house upside down looking for the missing coin, until you find it, and there is great joy. It’s about the joy you feel when something you thought was lost is found.

But, of course, these parables are not really about lost sheep or lost coins. They are about lost people.

That’s why this third parable—the one about the lost son, the Prodigal son—has a little different feel. I always get a little anxious when I talk about this parable because it is especially meaningful to me, and I don’t want to mess it up. I love this parable. I love this parable because it changed my life. You may think I’m overstating it a little bit, but it’s true. This parable set me on a whole new path in my relationship to God. This parable taught me about God’s grace.

It happened like this. I was in my first year of seminary. Now in the spirit of full disclosure: I wasn’t sure I was supposed to be in seminary. In fact, I was pretty sure I was not cut out to be a preacher. My father was a preacher, and I saw how on Saturday nights he struggled to put together a sermon, and I just didn’t think that was me. I couldn’t imagine coming up with something to say week after week, year after year. I just didn’t have that much to say. I think I went to seminary just to check it off the list and convince myself that it was NOT for me. So, there I was at Union Seminary.

One afternoon in our New Testament class, the professor was talking about this parable of the prodigal son. I have this vague memory of thinking, “Well, this will be a waste of time.” I

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knew this parable backward and forward. I'd heard it in Sunday School; I'd seen it acted out in Vacation Bible School. I didn't think that there was anything new I could learn about this parable.

I was wrong.

The professor—Dr. Balmer Kelly was his name--talked about how this younger brother had time and time again turned his back on his father, but how the father never turned his back on the son. Although I had heard this parable many times before, that day, as Dr. Kelly talked, something happened: it was as if I was hearing it for the very first time, and it was like he was talking about me and my relationship with God. I saw myself in that younger brother—how time and time again I had failed to be the person God wants me to be and yet God never gives up on me. That day it truly sank into me: the amazing grace of God. That God, the creator of the universe, God, the one who said “Let there be light,” and there was light, that God loves ME, Chuck Williamson. It was a transforming moment in my faith journey. That was the day that I discovered that I did have something that I wanted to tell other people about—God's grace, God's mercy, God's unconditional love. I've sometimes joked about the fact that I really have only one sermon, and I just try to come up with different ways to preaching it. It's that God loves me and God loves you.

So with that in mind, I'd like to take a little deeper dive into this parable. The story goes like this: the younger brother asks his father for his share of the inheritance which will come to him when the father dies. Now if you think about it, that's kinda like saying to the father, “I wish you were dead. So I could get my money.” Surely those words hurt the father deeply.

Nevertheless, the father gave the younger son what he asked for, and the boy headed off to enjoy his fortune. Now the parable doesn't tell us exactly how the boy went about enjoying his fortune—so we are left to imagine what we ourselves might do if we should come into such a windfall. Maybe he partied it away; maybe he gambled it away; maybe he just lived too far beyond his means. But whatever he did, after awhile, the money ran out, and he was broke.

So the boy had to get a job. Unfortunately the only job he could find was working on a pig farm. Now if you're a good Jew, you're going to gasp at the very idea of someone working on a pig farm. Pigs were considered ceremonially unclean, and no good Jew would even consider taking such a job. That just shows how far the boy had fallen—tending pigs. And

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there were times that the only food he had to eat was the food he was feeding to the pigs-- eating pig food.

Time passes, and the boy sinks deeper and deeper. Constantly the boy is thinking of home. Then one day he gets an idea. He decides to go back home and see if his father will take him on as a servant. He says to himself that at least back there, the servants had food to eat. So off he goes, rehearsing his little speech as he walks, “Father, I’m no longer worthy to be called your son, make me as one of your hired servants” ...and getting more and more anxious as he gets closer and closer to home.

But as he nears the house and makes that last bend in the road, while the house is still way off in the distance, he sees some figure running toward him. It’s his father, running like no self-respecting man would do, running toward his son, arms outstretched. All of a sudden the father was all over him, hugging him, kissing him—kissing that dirty, pig-smelling, selfish boy. And before the boy can even get into his prepared speech, the father interrupts him, calls out to the servants to get a robe and a ring and shoes and make preparations for a party for this boy who was lost but is found, who was dead but is alive.

Lost and found!

Now I that the parable doesn’t end here. There’s all the part about the older brother, but we’ll have to save that for another time, because it’s this younger brother that I can’t stop thinking about. I know this boy; I identify with him. I know that the traditional interpretation is that this boy “came to himself”, repented and gave up all his sinful ways once and for all, came back home and from then on was the dutiful obedient son. But I know this boy, and I know that as much as he tried to be the good son, he just couldn’t help himself, and before long he took off again. So what’s the father going to do when he comes home this time? Is he going to say, “I’m sorry; you had your chance and you blew it.”? I don’t think so. Because the father’s love is bigger than that, greater than that. It has no end; it is unconditional.

It’s no wonder that so many people were being drawn to hear Jesus. Who doesn’t want to hear about how much God loves them. I think about those people of “doubtful reputation”; those people who heard this story of a father’s love—they must have heard Jesus talking about them. No wonder they kept coming to hear him. Other people might have been judging them, but not Jesus. Jesus was welcoming them—even eating with them. Someone has said that this verse sums up the entire ministry of Jesus—he ate with tax collectors and sinners.

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**First Presbyterian
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I said earlier that my least favorite part of the worship service is the Prayer of Confession, but my absolute favorite part of the service, and the reason I keep coming back week after week, is the Assurance of Forgiveness. The promise that we who are sinners have a loving God who, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “remembers our sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34).

Amen.